

Goh's Consensus Politics of Authoritarian Rule

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It would be overstating the case to depict Goh Chok Tong as having transformed the nature of authoritarianism in Singapore during his time as Prime Minister and leader of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) between 1990 and 2004. Yet Goh did significantly refine the regime through his "consensus politics". Goh's predecessor, Lee Kuan Yew, had presided over the systematic obstruction of political opposition and the decimation of civil society. Against this background, and in the context of the city-state's deepening economic transformation, Goh understood that Singapore's growing social pluralism required a political accommodation. Towards this end, Goh and his administration fostered new formal and informal political institutions and updated the ideological rationale for the *de facto* one-party state. This included select avenues through which more diversity of views, criticisms and interests relevant to public policy could be expressed. Crucially, though, this generally involved expanding the political space of the state rather than any greater toleration of independent, collective organisations engaged in political competition with, or mobilisation against, the PAP. In other words, there was no dilution of authoritarian rule that, by definition, insulates power holders from genuinely competitive politics. Yet, paradoxically, increased political participation and consultation were integral to the structural and ideological refinement of authoritarian rule during the period of Goh's prime ministership.

This was only the second major refinement to the authoritarian regime since its inception in the 1960s. The first was under Lee, whereby administrative and legalistic techniques assumed vital strategic importance to political control. Recourse to security laws to detain critics and opponents was largely replaced by lawsuits and clever use of administrative law and legislation to constrain political competition.¹ This increased sophistication coincided with the changing character of the PAP itself. An acute concentration of power among bureaucratic and political elites had progressively taken place, a process rooted in the integration of state and party in the 1960s but subsequently given impetus by the maturation of state capitalism. Goh, a former civil servant and managing director of the state

shipping company, Neptune Orient Lines, was emblematic of this power concentration and narrowing leadership profile. Indeed, he was at the centre of an emerging powerful group of state capitalists who increasingly occupied political positions or exerted political influence. Importantly, the technocratic world view with which Goh was imbued resonated with the administrative and legalistic instruments of political control Lee had shifted emphasis to. Goh thus consolidated this process.

While during his leadership the government embarked on major refinements to authoritarianism, Goh appreciated that the regime was underscored by state paternalism. Since the early 1960s, PAP governments had cultivated heavy dependence on the state for social and economic resources. This relationship blocked independent bases of power, rendered Singaporeans vulnerable to potential political retribution such as through state discrimination in public housing upgrading and maximised the identification of social and economic progress with the PAP. As Prime Minister, Goh unapologetically exploited this relationship, both as a means of political intimidation and of political seduction.

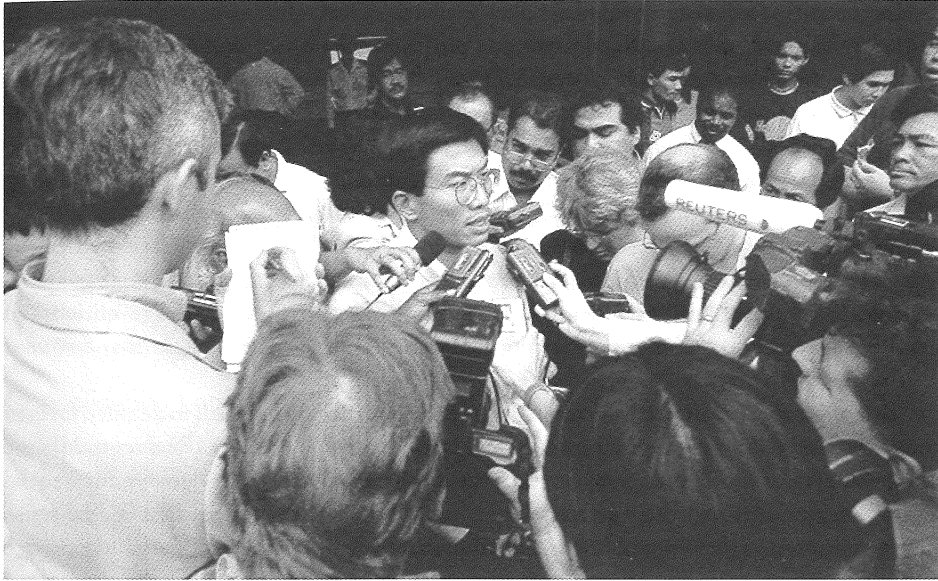
In short, Goh's creative crafting of political institutions to foster new forms of political participation combined with a consolidation of the obstacles to effective contestation against the PAP. Yet in simultaneously prosecuting political change and regime consolidation, Goh did engender in many Singaporeans a sense that the political system was evolving for the better and that further evolution was possible.

Expanding Political Space, Restricting Political Pluralism

At the 1984 General Election, the PAP suffered a 13 per cent swing against it. In the post-mortem, the ruling party concluded that a more complex and socially diverse society resulting from economic development necessitated new institutional and ideological responses. In effect, the capacity for political co-option needed revitalisation if political competition was to be contained.

Although the PAP did not articulate it in these terms, the limited capacity of traditional structures of political co-option—including the PAP-linked National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) and grassroots Citizens' Consultative Committees (CCCs)—to incorporate new social forces was a limitation of the existing authoritarian regime. Furthermore, as material inequalities and living costs increased with capitalist development, the incapacity of these organisations either to forcefully represent the interests of lower-income Singaporeans or to placate them effectively also posed a problem for the PAP. Meanwhile, the contradiction between technocratic and elitist official rhetoric that championed meritocracy and a dearth of opportunities for increasing numbers of middle class professionals to exert influence over public policy was becoming more apparent.

From the outset, Goh played a pivotal role in the updating of the structures and ideologies of political cooption. As First Deputy Prime Minister, he initially mooted the idea of the Feedback Unit, which was introduced in 1985 by the Ministry of Community Development. This provided extensive and varied channels of political communication and consultation for the public that by-passed party political contestation. In the process, the opportunities for Singaporeans to work with the government towards improving its public policy were markedly opened up. The Feedback Unit initiative was informed by Goh's genuinely held belief that "What a plural society like ours needs is a tradition of government which emphasises consensus instead of division, that includes rather than excludes, and that tries to maximise the participation of the population in the national effort, instead of minimising it".²



Charged for speaking without a public licence: Chee Soon Juan, 1999

Yet another significant reform pushed by Goh before he became prime minister, and consistent with this vision, was the amendment to the Constitution in 1990 to create a new category of parliamentarians: Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs). This arrangement was first signalled in the President's speech at the opening of Parliament in January 1989. Initially there was provision for up to six NMPs, each serving a potentially renewable two-and-a-half-year term and with limited voting rights. The number was increased to nine following the 1997 election. The President makes NMP appointments on the advice of a special select committee decided by the PAP-dominated parliament. Rhetorically, the initial emphasis was on the way such a system could draw on talented individuals and people with specialist expertise—which it in fact has often done. However, from the beginning the appointments were weighted towards functional representation of discrete interests, including domestic business, labour, women's and ethnic organisations. This implicitly recognised the inadequacy of existing structures of political representation. During the 1990s, the concept of functional representation was explicitly acknowledged and increasingly broadened to include a range of professional organisations and other interests. During his term as Prime Minister, Goh and the government-controlled domestic media regularly portrayed NMPs as superior parliamentary performers to elected opposition figures.

The political participation and consultation Goh was promoting were an alternative to political competition, not a supplement or adjunct to it—a point he underlined shortly after becoming prime minister. Goh stated at the time that it would take at least another 15 to 20 years before Singapore society was cohesive enough to be able to afford a multi-party system.³ However, Goh boasted just three years later that social cohesion was one of the key factors behind Singapore's high economic growth,⁴ suggesting that he was disingenuous in claiming lack of cohesion as an obstacle to a multi-party system. He subsequently explained that he had never subscribed to opposition politics, asserting that "I don't believe in constant bickering and struggling for power".⁵ Indeed, such was his aversion for combative, adversarial opponents that, in reference to the Singapore Democratic Party's Chee Soon Juan, he warned of the risk of "cancerous cells" being planted that could "infect" parliament.⁶

Importantly, Goh also provided the principal ideological refinement to the rationale for the one-party state through propagating and institutionalising ideas of consensus politics. The theme of this ideology was that conflict and contestation should be eschewed in favour of harmony and consensus. Although Goh dabbled in culturalist rationales for avoiding political contention, depicting the latter as antithetical to the so-called Asian way of putting the group ahead of the individual, the running on this particular front during the 1990s was primarily made by Lee Kuan Yew.⁷ In any case, the currency of such rhetoric was greatly diminished with the advent of the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis when the “Asian way” became too closely associated with corruption and economic mismanagement. Against this background, Goh’s distinctive ideological contribution was to enrich and amplify the idea of consensus politics through notions of civic engagement that favoured non-competitive politics.

This new conceptualisation of state-society relations manifested itself in detailed form in the government’s *Singapore 21* vision statement, released in April 1999.⁸ The central theme of this report was the need to complete the process of nation building and to develop a social and political model that more effectively incorporated citizens into public life. The loose model contained in the report emphasised the partnership between government, the private sector and the people. The instrumental nature of this “partnership” was most explicitly explained *vis-à-vis* the discussion of “civic groups” and how they could be harnessed to the national interest. The encouragement of “active citizenship” by the government had much less to do with the acknowledgement of any right to involvement in public decision-making by Singaporeans than with the purported technical benefits of drawing on wider expertise to help the government develop its policy, and the political benefits of regime stability by giving people a sense of involvement in the policy process.

However, attempts to exploit such official rhetoric by beginning to forge genuinely independent political spaces were given short shrift. In 2000, for example, the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) challenged the monopoly right of *Mendaki*—the PAP-dominated council for the development of the Muslim community—to represent ethnic Malays.⁹ The AMP proposed a “collective leadership” comprising “independent non-political” Malays to break the PAP stranglehold, a position argued on the basis that this was in keeping with the spirit of “active citizenship” being espoused by Goh’s government.¹⁰ Goh reprimanded the AMP for its proposal, warning the organisation not to stray into the political arena. The AMP retreated, publicly declaring that it never had any desire to get involved in politics.¹¹ This highlighted a contradiction inherent in the consensus politics of the PAP: the absence of genuinely independent political spaces through which the full range of views could be established before consensus is reached.

One of the most comprehensive expressions of Goh’s consensus politics is found in the deliberations and report of the Remaking Singapore Committee (2003).¹² The Committee’s deliberations involved an extensive review of the government’s social, political and cultural policies premised on the notion that Singaporeans need to “meet the challenges arising from our economic restructuring and stresses on our various social fault lines”. The Committee consulted as many as 10,000 Singaporeans at home and abroad, leading to seventy-four recommendations in the final report. Since the government accepted sixty of those recommendations, Goh was able to depict the exercise as proof positive of how his consensus politics involved Singaporeans in setting the direction for the country. Arguably, though, the most significant content in the Committee’s report was in the appendix, which identified proposals without consensus that were excluded from the recommendations.

These included changes to defamation laws to enhance free speech, and media liberalisation to improve the range and accessibility of information. There were also suggestions on how to implement a more level political playing field, such as adequate time between the announcement of new electoral boundaries and the holding of elections and transparency in the drawing of electoral boundaries.

As the Remaking Singapore Committee exercise revealed, "political consensus" must be broadly consistent with the PAP reform agenda. That which is not is, almost by definition, a matter of conflict and cannot be accommodated. Indeed, along with assorted pronouncements on consensus politics, Goh warned that those out to undermine the Government or wrest political control from the ruling party could expect "an extremely robust" response.¹³ As will be seen below, this was no idle threat.

Consolidating Legal and Administrative Controls

Goh's more relaxed and affable personality combined with his political consensus reforms gave the impression of a softening of authoritarian rule. Yet a hard edge remained to that rule which Goh helped consolidate, notably through shoring up the legal and administrative constraints on political competition with, and criticism of, his government. This direction gathered momentum after widespread international condemnation of Internal Security Act arrests in 1987 of 22 social activists for allegedly engaging in a "Marxist conspiracy" to bring down the Singapore state.¹⁴ The PAP sought a form of authoritarian rule within which political repression and persecution were less conspicuously linked to the discretionary powers of the PAP government.

A shift in emphasis towards legal and administrative techniques was in significant part possible because by the 1980s the state-party fusion embodied a vast network of informal PAP political connections and appointments. Since Lee had a hand in all important appointments, he could confidently step down and still exert considerable political influence within the state regardless of whether he remained part of the government. Government-linked corporations (GLCs) had evolved such that, increasingly, they provided vital levers of economic power controlled from outside formal political structures. As the chairman of the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation, responsible for the investment of Singapore's vast foreign reserves, Lee was strategically placed to act if necessary. As Prime Minister, Goh replenished that PAP network as the need arose, and adjusted and updated the laws and procedures administered by this network to keep executive authority resilient in the face of technological change and other dynamics.

One of Lee's most significant legacies was a system of rule by law as well as rule of law.¹⁵ In various international evaluations of the Singapore legal system conducted by management and business-oriented organisations, the city-state has enjoyed strong endorsements for its quality, administrative efficiency and technological innovation. This includes reports and studies by the Business Environment Risk Intelligence (BERI), Political and Economic Risks Consultancy (PERC) and the International Institute for Management Development (IMD).¹⁶ Yet the integrity of the legal system has also been called into question by a range of reputable international legal and human rights bodies, including the Bar Association of the City of New York,¹⁷ the International Commission of Jurists,¹⁸ Amnesty International (2006)¹⁹ and Asia Watch (1989),²⁰ all of which allege that Singapore's courts have been responsible for political persecution of government opponents.

Goh's continuity with Lee extended to using litigation against political opponents and critics, inflicting crippling damages awards that also sent a chilling message to other

would-be political combatants. This is likely to have been one political technique Lee was eager to see firmly entrenched by his successor. If Goh did come under pressure to carry this baton, his failure to resist it had important ramifications. Indeed, it was during Goh's period as Prime Minister that reflex resort to defamation actions became a generalised technique of the PAP leadership. This practice included joint actions comprising up to a dozen PAP leaders, calculated to compound financial injury to the defendant. Goh and other PAP leaders' suits eventually led to the bankruptcies, and hence ineligibility for parliamentary elections, of two of the opposition's most fearless characters: J.B. Jeyaretnam and Chee Soon Juan. Over the years, the former had faced a string of legal actions involving payments in excess of \$1.3 million. His bankruptcy in 2001 occurred in the wake of defamation suits relating to an article in the Workers' Party newspaper in 1995, brought by Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar and other PAP MPs, and separate suits emanating from the 1997 General Election campaign involving Goh and other senior PAP leaders. Chee was declared a bankrupt in 2006 after failing to pay Goh and Lee Kuan Yew \$500,000 in damages awarded in 2001 for defamation. Defamation suits also led to a third opponent, Tang Liang Hong, fleeing the country immediately after the 1997 General Election to avoid Singapore's courts. Tang was found guilty in absentia in 1997, with \$3.63 million damages awarded to Goh and other plaintiffs. He was declared a bankrupt in February 1998.

Media scrutiny and criticism was no less a target of Goh's litigation. For example, Goh teamed up with Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his son, Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in an action against the *International Herald Tribune* over a 1994 article which resulted in \$950,000 damages against the newspaper. Court actions have supplanted the expulsion of journalists as a means of discouraging critical reporting. Costly losses of access to circulation and advertising markets have also generally persuaded foreign publishers to a more cautious and circumspect reporting of Singapore affairs. Goh's government reinforced the threat posed by the Amendments to the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act in 1986 providing the capacity to restrict the circulation of foreign publications deemed to be "engaging in domestic politics". Like his predecessor, Goh repeatedly asserted the "right of reply" over content he took exception to in the international media circulating in Singapore.

Lee pioneered the use of defamation suits and media intimidation. However, Goh and other senior Cabinet colleagues helped to embed them within the leadership's political culture. Significantly, much of this was in concert with Lee Kuan Yew, who made it clear that he expected his example to be followed. Goh fully met this expectation.

Lee Kuan Yew used different means to deal with organised, collective political challenges. Through the Societies Act, civil society—and links between civil society and opposition parties—was effectively stymied by outlawing engagement in politics by groups not specifically registered for that purpose. However, over time Lee supplemented this and other repressive legislation with reliance on procedural and administrative techniques to obstruct political activism. These techniques varied, but included regulations covering licences and permits required for public rallies and the dissemination of political materials. So effective were these techniques, deployed under Goh in delaying and blocking political engagement by opponents, that a frustrated Singapore Democratic Party leader, Chee Soon Juan, deliberately breached the Public Entertainment Licensing Act in 1999 and 2002 to highlight the problems.²¹ Both violations resulted in his imprisonment.

During Goh's time at the helm of the PAP, new measures refined the manner and conditions of electoral contests. They included the Political Donations Act, which came into

effect in 2001 and required a public record of donors giving more than \$5,000 political donations in a financial year. Taken at face value, this appears an eminently reasonable move towards increased political transparency, but in a context where it seemed possible that donations to opposition parties might lead to political persecution, the legislation impaired the opposition's already meagre fund raising capacities. The Registry of Political Donations also announced that two non-party-political organisations registered with the Registry of Companies and Businesses—the Open Singapore Society and the Think Centre—would be considered political associations, making them subject to the Act. This ensured that supporters of embryonic civil society organisations would be brought under the same close scrutiny as those of formal political organisations.

Goh's government also bolstered the constraints on free expression in contending with potential challenges posed by new electronic media technologies. Through the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA) (Class License) Notification in 1996 and the Internet Code of Practice in 1997, Goh's government introduced one of the most ambitious and intrusive systems of regulations anywhere in the world to try and limit the political use of the Internet. The SBA was given wide scope to interpret what material was "objectionable on the grounds of public interest, public order, public security, national harmony, or is otherwise prohibited by applicable Singapore laws". The Singapore Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill of 2001 also brought rules governing foreign broadcasters into line with regulations for print media barring "interference in domestic politics". In the same year, the Parliamentary Elections Act was amended to superimpose the spirit of the Societies Act on the Internet, namely special sensitivity to, and regulation of, what is officially deemed to be political activity. Websites not registered as political organisations were barred from political promotion or campaigning during elections, and the use of mass email messages containing political advocacy by individuals was also curtailed.

Meanwhile, there was a noticeable loosening up in the letters to the editor pages—the Forum columns—of Singapore's daily English-language newspaper, *The Straits Times*. While certain issues still remained off limits, critical political expressions by individuals nevertheless appeared to be gaining increased official tolerance at the same time as the clamp on the mobilisation of independent, collective expressions remained tight.

Rewarding and Punishing through the State

Historically, the emergence of the authoritarian regime in Singapore was associated with an expanding state role in the economic and social sectors. There was nothing intrinsically authoritarian about this. Indeed, pressing employment, housing and healthcare needs contributed to the understandable PAP view that the state had a responsibility to help address these issues. However, the particular way that social and economic activities were carried out by the PAP became integral to the authoritarian regime. First, whereas the PAP generally welcomed international investment, it was more cautious about domestic capitalists—notably the ethnic Chinese business community, elements of which had been critical of the PAP and supported its political opponents in the 1960s. By expanding the economic role of the state, the PAP kept these forces at bay while developing the capital and power base of the PAP state. Second, fostering heavy reliance on the state for a wide range of social and economic resources facilitated political paternalism and retribution. Meanwhile, ideas of citizenship rights and welfare entitlements were discouraged.

Underlying political economy relationships of dependence were in place before Goh became Prime Minister. For example, state control over Singaporeans' enforced personal

savings had facilitated reliance on state housing for more than 80 per cent of the population. GLCs also dominated the commanding heights of the domestic economy, including the financial and telecommunications sectors, while the reach of statutory bodies meant that many job opportunities and access to business contracts were state-controlled. These structural realities favoured political docility. Goh further capitalised on state dependence for overt political advantage.

Goh embarked on pioneering election-eve initiatives for the spending of budget surpluses, much of which emanate from Singapore's profitable GLCs and public enterprises. So considerable was the capital at the disposal of GLCs by the 1990s that internationalisation became central to their accumulation strategies. Meanwhile, the government's fiscal surpluses assumed a strategic political significance as Singapore's increasing exposure to the forces of economic globalisation translated into rising material inequalities and living costs. Three months before the 2001 General Election, Goh announced the New Singapore Shares scheme under which part of the budget surpluses over the next five years would be distributed to the population. Singaporeans were to be given between \$200 and \$1,700 worth of "shares", which would return annual dividends from the government. At a cost of \$2.7 billion, Goh's administration cleverly utilised public money to project itself as benevolent while still denouncing "welfarism". This strategy was replicated by his successor, Lee Hsien Loong, who went into the May 2006 General Election offering Singaporeans a \$2.6 billion "Progress Package" in an apparent attempt to bolster electoral support. Not surprisingly, Lee rejected suggestions of this public spending as driven by electoral considerations, contending that it was part of a continuing effort to ensure Singapore is "strong, prosperous and happy, for many years to come".²²

Goh was also a trendsetter in exploiting dependence on the state to refine electoral intimidation.²³ Over 80 per cent of Singaporeans live in properties purchased from the government on 99-year leases. Pressuring voters in opposition-held wards prior to the 1997 and 2001 elections, Goh was explicit about political discrimination in publicly funded housing estate upgrading programmes. On the eve of the 1997 polls he warned that opposition estates risked eventually becoming "slums".²⁴ Goh supplemented this tactic in 2001 with promises of upgrading to those precincts within the opposition constituency of Potong Pasir where more than half the electorate supported the PAP.²⁵ This carrot and stick approach was also a feature of the 2006 electoral campaigns for Potong Pasir and the other opposition-held seat of Hougang, both of which involved Goh as strategic advisor to the PAP candidates.²⁶

Goh openly stated that state funds would be used for upgrading those constituencies that voted for the PAP. In the process, he made it abundantly clear that paternalism and intimidation are two sides of the same authoritarian coin in Singapore.

Conclusion

Given the careful and detailed nature of the PAP's political renewal processes, it was never possible that Lee Kuan Yew's successor or his Cabinet colleagues would embark on a dismantling of the authoritarian regime, incrementally or otherwise. Yet this did not mean that the regime would stand still. On the contrary, Lee had already begun modifying the system to enhance the durability of its essential features. The Goh administration entered into that process, devoting special attention and creativity to the refinement of the mechanisms for political co-option and the ideology rationalising the de facto one-party state. Rapid capitalist development and attendant social changes had placed pressures on some

of the established institutions and values. Yet Goh provided an effective political response and demonstrated that there is no inevitability that such pressures lead to a weakening of authoritarian regimes. On the contrary, he resigned from the leadership in 2004 not only against the backdrop of a resounding electoral victory, capturing 75 per cent of the valid votes and immense personal popularity, but also in a Singapore where the clamp on any form of organised, collective political competition remained as tight and effective as when he first led the party.

NOTES

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